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ABSTRACT

Groups of young, middle-aged, and elderly New Zealand men and women were surveyed for their opinions of the correct ages for a number of different aspects of life. Opinions were asked for the following age norms: (1) Descriptive--ages for young, middle-aged, and elderly men and women; (2) Family Life--age a man or woman marries, becomes a parent, and becomes a grandparent; (3) Career Age--age a man or woman becomes settled in a career and retires; (4) Personality--age a man or woman should be most asertive, agreeable and ambitious; and (5) Life-Goal--age a man or woman should be satisfied with life and have a sense of accomplishment. Results of the survey indicated that society had clearly defined ages for these aspects of life. In contrast, there was considerable variation regarding the appropriate age at which one should be concerned about these developmental milestones or how one should manifest various personality traits and characteristics necessary to attain one's goals. This pattern of results indicated that individuals tend to use social age norms to define the age-appropriate behavior of others, but use age norms about personality characteristics to define age-appropriate behavior for themselves. (Extensive tables of results are included.) (LLL)

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AGE NORMS IN NEW ZEALAND SOCIETY

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Groups of young, middle-aged, and elderly New Zealand men and women were surveyed as to their opinions concerning the correct ages for a number of different aspects of life. These groups were asked to provide opinions about:

Descriptive Age Norms - (e.g., What are the ages of young, middle-aged, elderly men and women, etc.)

Family Life Age Norms - (e.g., At what age should a man or woman marry, become a parent, become a grandparent, etc.)

Career Age Norms - (e.g., At what age should a man or woman be settled in a career, retire, etc.)

Personality Age Norms - (e.g., At what age should a man or woman be most assertive, agreeable, ambitious, etc.)

Life-Goal Age Norms - (e.g., At what age should a man or woman be satisfied with life, have a sense of accomplishment, etc.)

RESULTS

DESCRIPTIVE AGE NORMS

The results of this portion of the survey (Tables 2-4) showed considerable agreement between respondents of all age groups regarding the age at which one is considered to be a young adult or an old adult. Opinion as to what is the age of a middle-aged adult, however, showed considerable variation with responses ranging from a low of 30 years to a high of 60 years of age. The same trend of uncertainty regarding age-appropriate norms for middle-aged adults was repeated in other aspects of the survey.

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FAMILY LIFE / CAREER LIFE AGE NORMS

Analyses revealed a common trend in these aspects of the survey (Tables 5-16). Specifically, all respondents seemed to agree as to when one should attain various developmental milestones or accomplish various goals in life. Respondents from the different age groups were equally uncertain at which age should one be most concerned about each of these aspects of life.

Taken together, these two trends seemed to indicate that although society tends to define and inculcate age-appropriate norms for overt aspects of life, it is incumbent upon one's self to define one's own personal feelings and personality traits over the course of life.

PERSONALITY AGE NORMS

Two types of personality traits were examined in this survey: Terminal Values (Table 15)- which are thought to reflect the various personal life goals one hopes to attain and Instrumental Values (Tables 9-15)- which are though to reflect various personality characteristics needed to attain ones Terminal Values.

In an attempt to determine possible age-related differences in these personal characteristics, the responses of both the personality age norms survey and the life-cycle norms surveys were correlated with the respondents' opinions as to descriptive measures regarding the "prime" and "worst" times of life. These later two measures were chosen because they displayed the most inter-generational and inter-gender variablity of any of the survey questions. It was therefore thought that they might possibly be the most sensitive to any variations in the relation of personality traits with respondents' opinions both between the three age groups as well as the two age groups.

In general, the patterns of correlations (Tables 17-18) were approximately the same for measures of both the "prime" and "worst" times of life. That is, opinions regarding both times of life for someone of the same gender as the respondent seemed to be correlated with one's opinion regarding age-appropriate norms for the personality measures. In contrast, opinion about the "prime" and "worst" times of life for someone of the opposite gender seemed to be show more correlation with the various life-cycle norms.

CONCLUSIONS

The results of this survey clearly point to a considerable difference between sociological and psychological age norms. In general, the results of this survey seemed to indicate that society has clearly defined ages at which it is deemed appropriate to marry, decide upon a career, etc. These results also seemed to be in agreement with similar information presented by both Neugarten, Moore, and Lowe (1965) and Atchley (1975) suggesting that such age norms are a rather stable aspect of Western society.

In contrast, there was considerable variation regarding the appropriate age at which one should be concerned about these developmental milestones or how one should manifest various personality traits and characteristics necessary to attain one's goals. This pattern of results was taken to indicate that individuals tend to use social age norms to define the age appropriate behavior of others, but use age norms about personality characteristics to define age-appropriate behavior for themselves.

TABLE 1

Descriptive statistics for the six groups of participants.

	GROUP					
	YOUNG		MIDDLE-AGED		OLD	
	MEN	WOMEN	MEN	WOMEN	MEN	WOMEN
MEASURE						
AGE	20.2	19.8	48.5	46.8	69.3	68.6
EDUCATION-LEVEL [1]	3.4	3.6	4.2	4.7	4.9	4.5
OCCUPATION-LEVEL [1]	4.7	4.3	3.9	4.1	5.2	4.5
HEALTH-LEVEL [2]	2.4	1.9	2.7	2.8	3.5	3.8
ACTIVITY-LEVEL [2]	2.2	2.3	2.7	2.8	3.9	3.5
POLITICAL PREFERENCE [3]						
LABOUR	7	6	7	7	7	9
NATIONAL	10	9	11	10	10	11
NO PREFERENCE	5	6	5	7	7	5
OTHER	3	4	2	1	1	0
YEARLY INCOME [3]						
< $10,000	10	14	2	3	4	6
$10 - 20,000	11	9	6	10	14	17
$20 - 30,000	3	2	12	9	6	2
$30 - 40,000	1	0	3	2	1	0
> $40,000	0	0	2	1	0	0

1 These measures were adapted from Hollingshead's (1957) two-factor index of social position. The scales range from 1 to 7 with lower numbers representing higher levels of education and occupation, respectively.

2 These scales represent the participant's self-rating of their health and activity levels. These scales also range from 1 to 7 with lower numbers representing higher assessments of health and activity level, respectively.

3 These figures represent the raw number of participants in each category.

TABLE 2

Mean age responses of young, middle-aged, and old men and women to the questions: "What are the ages of a young / a middle-aged / and an old man and woman?".

AGE GROUP AND GENDER OF PARTICIPANTS	AGE GROUP AND GENDER OF PERSON MENTIONED IN THE SURVEY QUESTION					
	YOUNG		MIDDLE-AGED		OLD	
	MAN	WOMAN	MAN	WOMAN	MAN	WOMAN
YOUNG MEN	20.2	18.8	39.7	36.8	63.8	67.9
YOUNG WOMEN	18.6	17.9	39.5	39.0	62.2	64.3
MIDDLE-AGED MEN	20.9	18.9	46.4	43.9	65.1	68.1
MIDDLE-AGE WOMEN	19.2	18.0	52.6	47.2	60.1	62.5
OLD MEN	21.2	19.5	55.3	56.7	68.4	68.3
OLD WOMEN	19.8	18.3	58.2	57.1	60.3	61.8

AGES SHARING THE SAME BOX ARE NOT SIGNIFICANTLY DIFFERENT.

TABLE 3

Mean age responses of young, middle-aged, and old men and women to the questions: "What is the prime of life for a man / woman?".

AGE GROUP AND GENDER OF PARTICIPANTS	GENDER OF PERSON MENTIONED IN THE SURVEY QUESTION: MAN	GENDER OF PERSON MENTIONED IN THE SURVEY QUESTION: WOMAN
YOUNG MEN	25.7	27.8
YOUNG WOMEN	26.2	24.3
MIDDLE-AGED MEN	35.2	29.6
MIDDLE-AGED WOMEN	28.4	33.0
OLD MEN	66.8	62.7
OLD WOMEN	56.5	48.9

AGES SHARING THE SAME BOX ARE NOT SIGNIFICANTLY DIFFERENT

TABLE 4

Mean age responses of young, middle-aged, and old men and women to the questions: "What is the worst time of life for a man / woman?".

AGE GROUP AND GENDER OF PARTICIPANTS	GENDER OF PERSON MENTIONED IN THE SURVEY QUESTION: MAN	GENDER OF PERSON MENTIONED IN THE SURVEY QUESTION: WOMAN
YOUNG MEN	63.5	66.1
YOUNG WOMEN	29.9	28.7
MIDDLE-AGED MEN	66.0	59.8
MIDDLE-AGED WOMEN	45.2	49.4
OLD MEN	70.3	62.1
OLD WOMEN	61.5	64.6

AGES SHARING THE SAME BOX ARE NOT SIGNIFICANTLY DIFFERENT

TABLE 5

Mean age responses of participants to the questions concerning age norms for phases of the career life cycle.

PHASE OF CAREER LIFE CYCLE	GENDER OF PERSON MENTIONED IN THE SURVEY QUESTION: MAN	WOMAN
AT WHAT AGE SHOULD A MAN / WOMAN:		
BEGIN TO WORK FULL-TIME?	21.1	20.7
BE ESTABLISHED IN A CAREER?	25.3	23.9
BE AT THE TOP OF ONE'S CAREER?	50.4	43.8
RETIRE?	64.9	60.2

TABLE 6

Mean age responses of young, middle-aged, and old men and women to the questions: "At what age should a man / woman be most concerned about his / her career?".

AGE GROUP AND GENDER OF PARTICIPANTS	GENDER OF PERSON MENTIONED IN THE SURVEY QUESTION: MAN	WOMAN
YOUNG MEN	29.3	27.3
YOUNG WOMEN	30.2	26.7
MIDDLE-AGED MEN	31.0	26.9
MIDDLE-AGED WOMEN	41.4	47.5
OLD MEN	48.3	46.7
OLD WOMEN	51.2	45.2

AGES SHARING THE SAME BOX ARE NOT SIGNIFICANTLY DIFFERENT

TABLE 7

Mean age responses of participants to the questions concerning age norms for phases of the family life cycle.

PHASE OF FAMILY LIFE CYCLE	GENDER OF PERSON MENTIONED IN THE SURVEY QUESTION: MAN	WOMAN
AT WHAT AGE SHOULD A MAN / WOMAN:		
LEAVE HOME ?	18.4	19.8
MARRY ?	26.3	23.2
BECOME A PARENT ?	28.7	24.5
BECOME A GRANDPARENT ?	51.9	48.1

TABLE 8

Mean age responses of young, middle-aged, and old men and women to the questions: "At what age should a man / woman be most concerned about his / her family?".

AGE GROUP AND GENDER OF PARTICIPANTS	GENDER OF PERSON MENTIONED IN THE SURVEY QUESTION: MAN	WOMAN
YOUNG MEN	28.5	27.2
YOUNG WOMEN	27.0	25.7
MIDDLE-AGED MEN	31.2	30.4
MIDDLE-AGED WOMEN	41.9	45.6
OLD MEN	42.0	40.1
OLD WOMEN	41.8	45.3

AGES SHARING THE SAME BOX ARE NOT SIGNIFICANTLY DIFFERENT

TABLE 9

Mean age responses of young, middle-aged, and old men and women to the questions: "At what age should a man / woman have the most independence?

AGE GROUP AND GENDER OF PARTICIPANTS	GENDER OF PERSON MENTIONED IN THE SURVEY QUESTION: MAN	GENDER OF PERSON MENTIONED IN THE SURVEY QUESTION: WOMAN
YOUNG MEN	18.2	23.6
YOUNG WOMEN	24.9	27.3
MIDDLE-AGED MEN	38.7	30.9
MIDDLE-AGED WOMEN	38.0	47.6
OLD MEN	50.0	49.1
OLD WOMEN	55.4	50.4

AGES SHARING THE SAME BOX ARE NOT SIGNIFICANTLY DIFFERENT

TABLE 10

Mean age responses of young, middle-aged, and old men and women to the questions: "At what age should a man / woman be most ambitious ?

AGE GROUP AND GENDER OF PARTICIPANTS	GENDER OF PERSON MENTIONED IN THE SURVEY QUESTION: MAN	GENDER OF PERSON MENTIONED IN THE SURVEY QUESTION: WOMAN
YOUNG MEN	25.3	23.0
YOUNG WOMEN	26.9	26.4
MIDDLE-AGED MEN	31.0	25.7
MIDDLE-AGED WOMEN	29.0	41.5
OLD MEN	48.8	49.7
OLD WOMEN	52.1	55.4

AGES SHARING THE SAME BOX ARE NOT SIGNIFICANTLY DIFFERENT

TABLE 11

Mean age responses of young, middle-aged, and old men and women to the questions: "At what age is a man / woman most capable of accomplishing his / her goals ?"

AGE GROUP AND GENDER OF PARTICIPANTS	GENDER OF PERSON MENTIONED IN THE SURVEY QUESTION: MAN	WOMAN
YOUNG MEN	32.7	32.4
YOUNG WOMEN	37.1	30.8
MIDDLE-AGED MEN	45.0	33.9
MIDDLE-AGED WOMEN	46.6	37.2
OLD MEN	50.8	39.4
OLD WOMEN	51.5	37.3

AGES SHARING THE SAME BOX ARE NOT SIGNIFICANTLY DIFFERENT

TABLE 12

Mean age responses of young, middle-aged, and old men and women to the questions: "At what age should a man / woman be most courageous ?"

AGE GROUP AND GENDER OF PARTICIPANTS	GENDER OF PERSON MENTIONED IN THE SURVEY QUESTION: MAN	WOMAN
YOUNG MEN	30.7	31.9
YOUNG WOMEN	29.4	24.2
MIDDLE-AGED MEN	44.3	42.0
MIDDLE-AGED WOMEN	52.1	51.0
OLD MEN	55.7	56.8
OLD WOMEN	52.1	55.4

AGES SHARING THE SAME BOX ARE NOT SIGNIFICANTLY DIFFERENT

TABLE 13

Mean age responses of young, middle-aged, and old men and women to the questions: "At what age should a man / woman have the most self-control ?"

AGE GROUP AND GENDER OF PARTICIPANTS	GENDER OF PERSON MENTIONED IN THE SURVEY QUESTION: MAN	WOMAN
YOUNG MEN	31.2	32.7
YOUNG WOMEN	33.4	29.8
MIDDLE-AGED MEN	38.2	36.5
MIDDLE-AGED WOMEN	43.4	49.1
OLD MEN	42.6	47.9
OLD WOMEN	48.7	57.2

AGES SHARING THE SAME BOX ARE NOT SIGNIFICANTLY DIFFERENT

TABLE 14

Mean age responses of young, middle-aged, and old men and women to the questions: "At what age should a man / woman have the greatest sense of responsibility ?"

AGE GROUP AND GENDER OF PARTICIPANTS	GENDER OF PERSON MENTIONED IN THE SURVEY QUESTION: MAN	WOMAN
YOUNG MEN	33.7	32.1
YOUNG WOMEN	31.9	35.4
MIDDLE-AGED MEN	45.2	45.9
MIDDLE-AGED WOMEN	51.8	43.2
OLD MEN	57.6	51.1
OLD WOMEN	52.0	56.6

AGES SHARING THE SAME BOX ARE NOT SIGNIFICANTLY DIFFERENT

TABLE 15

Mean age responses of participants to the questions concerning age norms for Terminal Values.

	GENDER OF PERSON MENTIONED IN THE SURVEY QUESTION	
	MAN	WOMAN
TERMINAL VALUE		
AT WHAT AGE SHOULD A MAN / WOMAN HAVE THE GREATEST SENSE OF:		
ACCOMPLISHMENT?	58.7	59.6
SELF-RESPECT?	63.4	61.2
SECURITY?	65.5	68.3
WISDOM?	67.9	69.4
INNER PEACE / HARMONY?	70.9	68.1
LIFE-SATISFACTION?	71.2	74.8

TABLE 16

Mean age responses of young, middle-aged, and old men and women to the questions: "At what age should a man / woman be most concerned with himself / herself?

AGE GROUP AND GENDER OF PARTICIPANTS	GENDER OF PERSON MENTIONED IN THE SURVEY QUESTION: MAN	GENDER OF PERSON MENTIONED IN THE SURVEY QUESTION: WOMAN
YOUNG MEN	24.2	27.6
YOUNG WOMEN	23.8	24.3
MIDDLE-AGED MEN	45.5	31.1
MIDDLE-AGED WOMEN	50.9	52.6
OLD MEN	55.4	46.2
OLD WOMEN	63.0	65.7

AGES SHARING THE SAME BOX ARE NOT SIGNIFICANTLY DIFFERENT

TABLE 17

Correlations between ages reported by participants for Career and Family Life Cycle stages, Instrumental Values, Terminal Values, and the age at which one should be most concerned with himself or herself (for someone of the same gender as themselves).

	MEN			WOMEN		
	YOUNG	MIDDLE-AGED	OLD	YOUNG	MIDDLE-AGED	OLD
FAMILY LIFE-CYCLE						
LEAVE HOME	.442*	.203	.184	.178	.003	.109
MARRY	-.169	-.284	.299	.361	.171	.430*
BECOME A PARENT	.102	.012	-.214	-.006	.245	.073
BECOME A GRANDPARENT	-.113	.036	-.176	.199	.019	-.280
CONCERNED WITH FAMILY	.043	.189	-.131	-.041	.272	-.162
CAREER LIFE-CYCLE						
WORK FULL-TIME	.125	-.116	.222	.257	-.036	-.211
SETTLE ON A CAREER	.401*	-.194	.113	.149	.417*	.192
TOP OF CAREER	-.109	.564**	.223	.202	-.246	.203
RETIRE	.053	-.199	.012	.273	.175	.047
CONCERNED WITH CAREER	-.042	.311	.173	-.018	.239	-.132
INSTRUMENTAL VALUES						
SELF-CONTROL	.076	.259	.243	-.091	.496*	.230
SENSE OF RESPONSIBILITY	.201	.475*	.092	.412*	.407*	.248
COURAGEOUS	.086	-.330	.034	.119	.451*	.356
AMBITIOUS	.463*	-.112	.173	-.150	-.002	.258
INDEPENDENCE	.439*	.459*	.010	.533**	.174	.187
ACCOMPLISH GOALS	.523**	.512**	.102	.474*	-.159	.199
TERMINAL VALUES						
SENSE OF ACCOMPLISHMENT	.147	.050	.695**	.302	-.031	-.022
SENSE OF SELF-RESPECT	.173	.222	.005	.104	.237	.098
SENSE OF SECURITY	.056	.230	.506**	.128	.118	.438*
WISDOM	.217	.059	.056	-.049	.044	-.214
INNER PEACE	-.085	.427	.011	.119	.039	.485*
LIFE SATISFACTION	.169	.200	.049*	.180	.233	.449*

* $p<.05$; ** $p<.01$

TABLE 18

Correlations between ages reported by participants for Career and Family Life Cycle stages, Instrumental Values, Terminal Values, and the age at which one should be most concerned with himself or herself (for someone of the opposite gender as themselves).

	MEN			WOMEN		
	YOUNG	MIDDLE-AGED	OLD	YOUNG	MIDDLE-AGED	OLD
FAMILY LIFE-CYCLE						
LEAVE HOME	-.099	-.147	-.068	.472*	.153	.066
MARRY	.520**	.497*	.444*	.181	.431*	.437*
BECOME A PARENT	.422*	.178	.590**	-.113	.587**	.412*
BECOME A GRANDPARENT	-.188	.241	-.105	.019	-.101	-.064
CONCERNED WITH FAMILY	.433*	-.290	.214	.163	.553**	.433*
CAREER LIFE-CYCLE						
WORK FULL-TIME	.108	.241	.151	.474*	.441*	-.203
SETTLE ON A CAREER	-.079	.252	.126	.698**	.587**	-.008
TOP OF CAREER	.135	.194	-.045	.243	.200	.463*
RETIRE	.326	.218	.041	.312	.219	.491*
CONCERNED WITH CAREER	-.131	.248	.154	.465*	.435*	.206
INSTRUMENTAL VALUES						
SELF-CONTROL	.117	.084	.305	.057	.299	.155
SENSE OF RESPONSIBILITY	.358	.277	.278	.413*	.185	.043
COURAGEOUS	.192	.268	.196	.289	.377	.247
AMBITIOUS	.349	.479*	.219	.382	.396	.373
INDEPENDENCE	.275	.296	.487*	.363	.352	.165
ACCOMPLISH GOALS	.242	.399	.269	.412	.371	.230
TERMINAL VALUES						
SENSE OF ACCOMPLISHMENT	.085	.093	.289	.264	.122	.482*
SENSE OF SELF-RESPECT	-.157	.279	.241	.382	.211	.300
SENSE OF SECURITY	.052	.177	.430*	.105	.288	.241
WISDOM	.068	.234	.203	.290	.055	.357
INNER PEACE	-.011	.128	.289	.133	.118	.159
LIFE SATISFACTION	.191	.149.	.483*	.222	.174	.077

* $p<.05$; ** $p<.01$